

# THE BABYLONIAN WORLD



Edited by

Gwendolyn Leick

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# THE WRITING, SENDING AND READING OF LETTERS IN THE AMORITE WORLD\*



*Dominique Charpin*

The archives left in the palace of Mari by the Babylonians when they destroyed it in 1759 BC cover a period of some twenty-five years, during which the throne was occupied first by Yasmah-Addu and then by Zimri-Lim.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the very numerous administrative documents they contain several thousand letters, of which some 2,500 have been published in their entirety. Many studies have been devoted to their content but not to the way in which the letters were actually written by, or on behalf of, the sender, conveyed to the addressee, and then read by or to the latter. Yet this is something that historians need to know if they are to properly understand the correspondence. The well-known advantage of the Mari archives is that they offer documentation on a number of different kingdoms, some even outside the Middle Euphrates region. This chapter will be essentially concerned with the writing and reading of royal correspondence, that is to say, with letters sent or received by kings, but I shall on occasion also consider letters that do not form part of the royal correspondence so defined.<sup>2</sup>

## THE WRITING OF LETTERS

Letters seem to have been written in one of two ways, being either dictated, or drafted by a scribe. Once the tablet was inscribed, the scribe would read it over to his master, making corrections as necessary, and then enclose it in an envelope, which he would seal with the sender's cylinder-seal. The letter was then ready to be sent to its addressee.

### Letters written in Akkadian

It has to be said first of all that with the exception of only one (written in Hurrian), all the letters discovered in the Mari archives are in the Akkadian language. None are written in Amorite, a language known to us only from proper names and a number of technical terms.<sup>3</sup> The question arises, then, whether Akkadian was the language spoken in the kingdom of Mari and its neighbours, or whether we are faced with a case of bilingualism, with Akkadian serving as the language of written culture and

Amorite as the language of speech. Opinions vary greatly, but it is likely that the elite spoke both Amorite and Akkadian (Durand 1992: 123–126), a situation that would account for the possibility of dictation.

### Dictation or drafting from notes?

In some cases the scribe would appear to have written directly from dictation. Several letters of the king Samsi-Addu in which he rages against his son Yasmah-Addu were clearly dictated in anger; some sentences remain unfinished, some have long incisions, while in others the verb is not in the final position where it ought to be, and so on. An explicit mention of dictation comes from the city of Andarig, south of Jebel Sinjar, where a prophet of the god Šamaš asks the Mari representative to provide a scribe so that he may dictate to him a letter from his god to the king Zimri-Lim.<sup>4</sup>

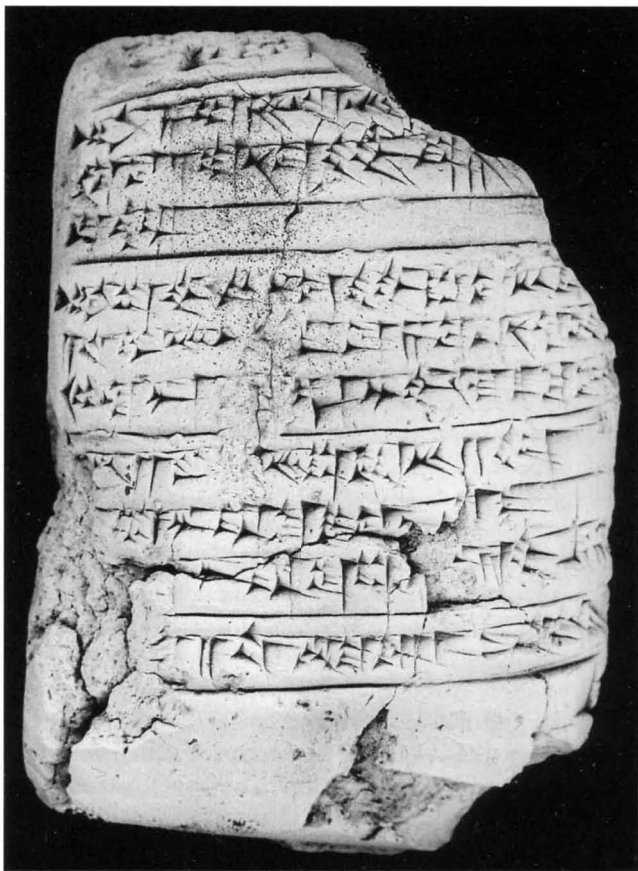
Most often, however, the king would simply provide his secretary with the gist of the message to be communicated; a number of tablets contain notes taken on such occasions (Joannès 1983, 1985 and 1987). These served as a skeleton for the definitive text composed by the scribe, who was actually responsible for the drafting. The style of the letters is furthermore characterised by a relatively rigid rhetoric – a fact that allows us today to reconstruct gaps in the text. Writing not from dictation but from instructions provided had a number of advantages, such as avoiding the need to write quickly<sup>5</sup> and allowing the selection of a tablet of a size appropriate to the length of the message. Certain unsent letters may well represent such first drafts.

The quality of scribal drafting was variable<sup>6</sup> as was the clarity of a dictated message. Išme-Dagan on one occasion complains to his brother Yasmah-Addu that the meaning of one of his letters is unclear,<sup>7</sup> a reproach also addressed to him by Samsi-Addu.<sup>8</sup> Given this, it may be supposed that the drafting of royal letters was not work for any scribe, being a confidential role that could only be fulfilled by someone close to the king. Proof of this is offered by Išme-Dagan, who not having sent news to Yasmah-Addu for some time, explains this by the absence of a certain Limi-Addu, who clearly acted as his secretary:<sup>9</sup> ‘Earlier you sent me a letter, but I had just returned from an expedition and had sent Limi-Addu to organise his estate. There was no-one to write a full message; so I sent no reply to your letter.’ It is unlikely that Išme-Dagan had no other scribes in his entourage, but what he needed was a scribe who could write him a ‘full message’ (*têmun gamrum*), which here we may understand as ‘a detailed letter’.

Certain letters make explicit allusion to the fact that the text could be longer, but that there was no point in spending more time on the subject. The minister Habdumalik even justifies brevity by the need not to exceed the limits of a tablet!<sup>10</sup>

I went to Karana and I conveyed to Asqur-Addu all the instructions that my lord gave me. Why should I delay any longer in writing to my lord? So that the information should not be so abundant as to be incapable of being written on one tablet I have summed up the gist of the matter and have written to my lord.

It used to be thought that only professional scribes were able to write, but there is much evidence, especially in the Mari archives, to indicate that this was not the case. Some administrators but also generals were able to read, and, if necessary, to



**Figure 28.1** Example of a memorandum which shows signs of carelessness. The scribe has divided different topics into paragraphs separated by a double line. (A.3209: 23–25; published by F. Joannès, *Mél. Biot*: 108–109.

write.<sup>11</sup> Certain letters of poor quality may have been written by their senders without the mediation of a scribe.<sup>12</sup>

When thinking of sending a letter, a king might ask the advice of a counsellor or of someone close to him, who would make suggestions. One thus sees Zimri-Lim ask Sammetar to join him to draw up a reply to a letter received from Hammu-rabi:<sup>13</sup> ‘A tablet has come to me from Babylon; come, so that we may hear this tablet, discuss it and reply.’

There is also another letter, in which, inversely, Sammetar submits to Zimri-Lim the draft of a letter to be sent to the king of Aleppo.<sup>14</sup>

### Scribal conventions of letter writing

Within the class of ‘practical documents’ a distinction is traditionally drawn between legal and economic texts on the one hand and letters on the other, the former being

essentially formulaic while the latter are much more lively. Yet letters, too, represent a literary genre with its own rules, even though they seem less constraining. We know, too, that the scribal apprenticeship included the copying of letters (Sallaberger 1999: 149–154). Rather than a specific format, there are scribal conventions or formulae, particularly for the address and the conclusion, as well as a number of recurrent rhetorical figures.

The opening formula of an Old-Babylonian letter betrays the oral origins of the transmission of messages; the first lines always consist of two parts:<sup>15</sup> ‘To X, say: thus speaks Y.’ Who is addressed by the imperative ‘speak’? It is generally thought that the formula retains the memory of its oral origins, and that it is the messenger who is addressed (Kraus 1973: 40). Two examples confirm this as they demonstrate how messengers communicated orally their master’s message. This is how Išme-Dagan’s envoys to Hammu-rabi accomplished their mission:<sup>16</sup> ‘They were asked for news. They therefore delivered their report: “Thus [speaks] your servant Išme-Dagan (. . .).”’

In the same way, when one of king Šarraya’s ministers passes on his message to a neighbouring king he says:<sup>17</sup> ‘Thus [speaks] Šarraya.’

These examples clearly show that the first part of the address is directed to the messenger. The addressee is identified at the beginning, by his name or title or both. In general, letters from a subject to his king begin with the formula ‘To my lord’. When this is followed by the name of the king (‘To my lord Zimri-Lim’), the sender is a foreigner.

The second part of the address identifies the sender: he may be identified by title rather than by name, or the name may be followed by an epithet that situates him in relation to the addressee. Very often a subject addressing his sovereign is described as ‘your servant’. As the rest of the letter is written in the third person, the employment of the second person here indicates that the second part of the address is speech put into the mouth of the messenger who speaks to the addressee. It is only then that one finds the words the sender intends directly for his correspondent. The wording adopted is by no means a matter of chance: the manner in which a king addressed another in a letter was governed by a strict code of etiquette. Certain texts show that there were clear rules which the ancients took care to observe: according to his hierarchical position, a king would address another as his father, brother, son or servant. One thus sees the nomad chief Ašmad advising king Zimri-Lim at the beginning of his reign, concerning his relations with Aduna-Addu, the powerful king of Hanzat:<sup>18</sup>

Aduna-Addu had a tablet brought to me, saying: ‘Why does your lord write to me as a father?’ This tablet was brought to me by Yattu-Lim. Let my lord question Yattu-Lim. My lord must gain the goodwill of Aduna-Addu, because of the Benjaminites. Aduna-Addu, continually . . . [gap] . . . ‘Why does Zimri-Lim not address me as a brother?’ Now, tone down your address. When you have a tablet taken to Aduna-Addu, write to him as a brother, if you wish him to reject an alliance with the Benjaminites. My lord must gain the goodwill of Aduna-Addu.

One notices that blessings appear only in private correspondence and never in letters addressed to kings or written by them (Dalley 1973). It was common, however, to reassure the addressee regarding matters of concern to them. Governors and other

local officials thus generally write that 'all is well with the district'. Generals on campaign, on the other hand, report that 'all is well with the troops; my lord need not be concerned'. These formulae often appear immediately after the address, and are sometimes used to conclude the letter. Very often, the sender closes by indicating that he requires a reply, sometimes urgently.

Unlike our own, these letters generally bear neither a date nor an indication of geographical origin. It may be that the bearer of the message would provide this information, whose absence is such a problem for us today. When letters are dated, they show the day of the month, and never the year, proving that such dating owed nothing to the requirements of archiving – unlike the case of administrative and legal texts.

### Re-reading

Whether dictated or otherwise, once the tablet was inscribed the scribe had to read it back to his master before placing it in its envelope. This confirms the point made earlier regarding the use of the Akkadian language, for such re-reading would make no sense if the sender were incapable of understanding what was read out by the scribe. During re-reading, the sender would sometimes indicate changes to be made in the text: this, likely, is how we must understand those occasions when words, or even entire lines, have been erased and rewritten. That a certain number of mistakes (signs omitted, etc.) remain in the letters despite this re-reading is probably an inescapable consequence of 'global reading' (word read without sign-by-sign decipherment), practised by the scribes as it is by us. One episode shows how in the absence of re-reading, a scribe mixed up one place name with another, resulting in the king receiving false information about the capture of a town by the enemy.<sup>19</sup>

Scribes did not generally keep copies of the letters they wrote. What survive in the way of letters written by the kings of Mari to persons outside the capital<sup>20</sup> are either first drafts<sup>21</sup> or letters that were for some reason not sent. The absence of copies explains a constant feature of the letters: an opening reference to the burden of the letter earlier received from the person to whom the reply is addressed.

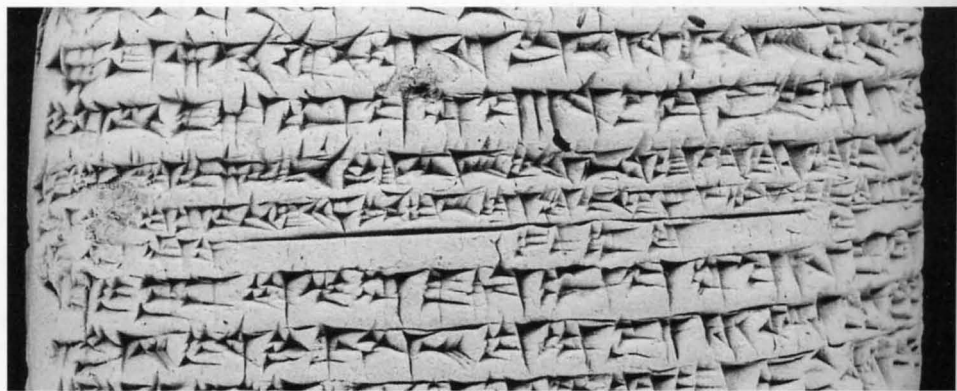
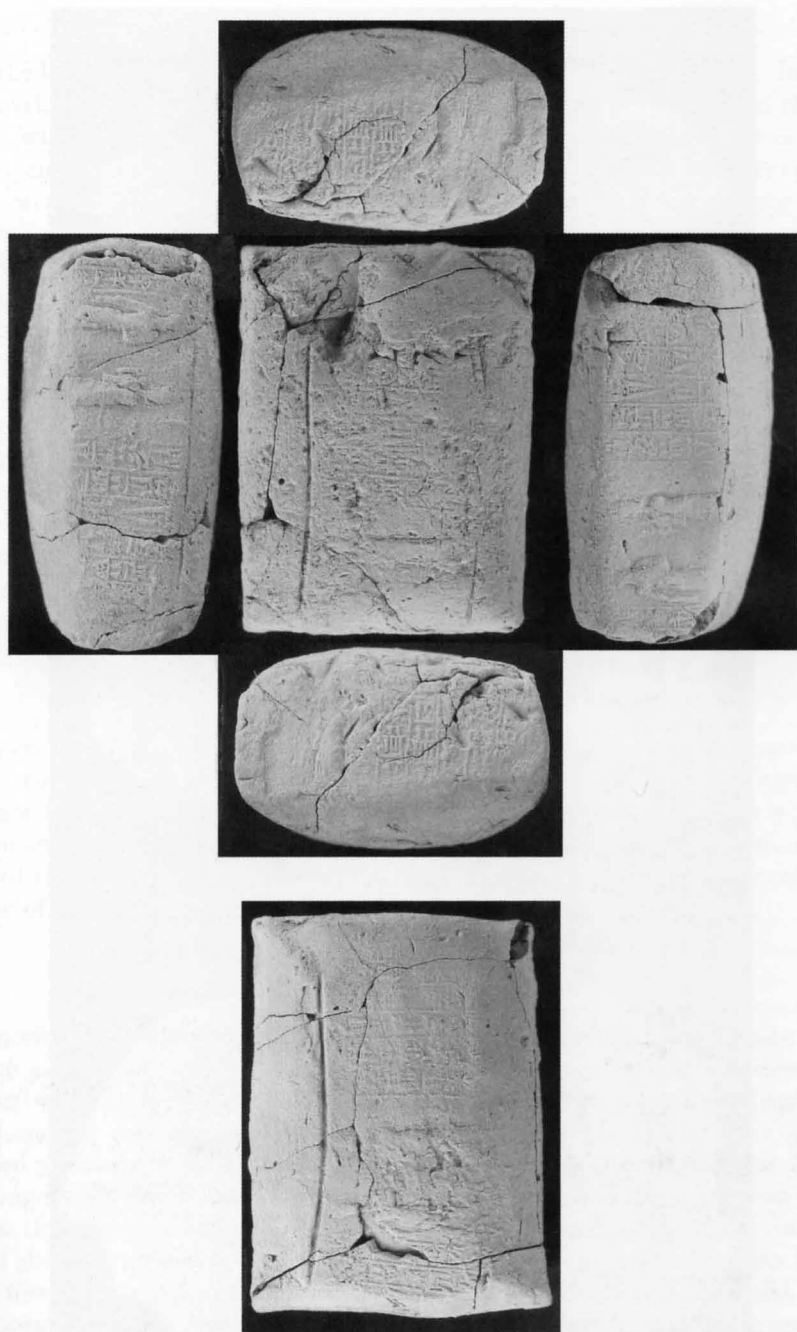


Figure 28.2 Passage of a letter which shows a change of mind by the scribe who has erased two lines in order to fit in three, using smaller characters. (A.486+, published by P. Villard, *FM* [I]: 141).



**Figure 28.3** Envelope of a letter by Zimri-Lim to Tiš-ulme. On the surface we can read 'To Tiš-ulme'. Also visible is the imprint of the sender's cylinder seal on the obverse and the reverse (the edge of the seal has left a rather deep groove), as well as on the edge. (Museum of Dêr ez-Zor, photo: Archives royales de Mari). The seal shows a classic scene ('warrior with mace' facing a protective goddess) and a six-line inscription.

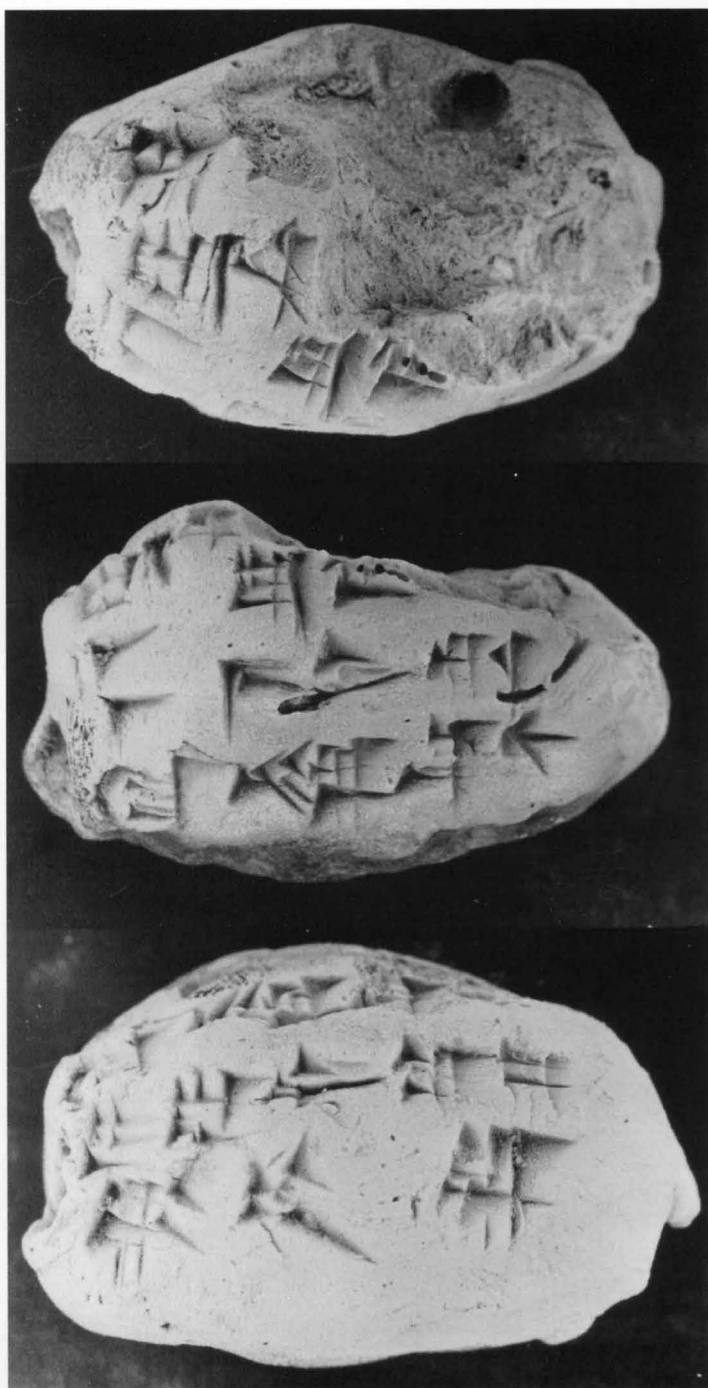


Figure 28.4 Label of a tablet-basket in the shape of an olive; on the left is a trace of the string used to tie up the contents. The inscription indicates that four letters used to be kept there before they were sent (M.8762, published in D. Charpin 2001: 21).



## Envelope and seal

Once the letter had been written and read back, it was put in its envelope. Inevitably this envelope would be destroyed by the addressee in gaining access to the letter within, which explains the scarcity of envelopes that have survived entire or in part. The imprint of the seal of Zimri-Lim has been found on fragments of letter envelopes in the palace of Mari,<sup>22</sup> and also at that of Qaṭṭarâ.<sup>23</sup> The impression of the sender's seal both ensured the confidentiality of the message and guaranteed its provenance. Once the tablet was in its envelope, it was too late to add anything at all, and if further information had to be sent to the king, a new letter would have to be written. This is explicitly mentioned by Buqâqum:<sup>24</sup> 'My tablet had just been put in its envelope when the couriers, four men of Asqur-Addu's, arrived, saying; . . . '.

A very particular document shows how the royal chancellery stored letters awaiting dispatch: this is a label from a tablet-basket, bearing the inscription:<sup>25</sup> 'Four [tablets] to be read to [Iddiyatum], Yasim-El, Menirum and Belšunu; they are ready.'

It would appear that these were letters to persons in official positions in the region of Djebel Sinjar: clearly they were intended to travel in the same bag. Either one messenger would have taken each to its addressee, doing a 'round' passing through Andarig and Karana, or they would have travelled by relay, and the tablets at the end forwarded to their addressees.

## CARRYING THE MAIL

The ways in which letters were conveyed to their addressees varied considerably (Lafont 1997). We shall look first at the rich vocabulary that describes 'messengers' and then see that there were, side by side, letter-carriers invested with a personal mission and a postal service that transported the letters by using a system of relays. We will consider, finally, the dangers these messengers might encounter, especially in time of war.

### A very rich vocabulary

The vocabulary designating persons responsible for carrying letters is very diverse, and the nuances implied by the different terms are not yet entirely understood. A first distinction, however, is clear: there were on the one hand messengers proper (*mâr šiprim*) and on the other mere 'tablet-carriers' (*wâbil ṭuppi*), who were generally expected to return immediately after making delivery. Unpublished text M.5696, recording the enrolment (*piqittum*) of soldiers in the gardens of Saggaratum on 8/xii/ZL 9, is in this respect doubly important. First, because one finds in it the distinction evoked above, expressed in another terminology that distinguishes between 'those to whom messages are confided' (*ša šipirâtim*) and 'runners' (*lâsimum*). And second, because this document gives us the number of men mobilised when Zimri-Lim departed with all his army to help the king of Aleppo: he was accompanied by no less than 100 *ša šipirâtim* and 64 *lâsimum*. These figures are unexpected: never has it been thought that the kingdom of Mari had such a number of messengers. They find confirmation, however, in a document covering the district of Saggaratum alone, which testifies to the existence there of 19 *ša šipirâtim* and 22 *lâsimum*. M.5696 is thus by no means

the result of exceptional circumstances attending the preparation of a military campaign: use was made of those who were normally responsible for the transport of mail.

### Personal letter-carriers and relay systems

In the context of diplomatic relations, messengers were often given a tablet which they carried to the king to whom the letter was addressed. However, once the messages were first set down in writing, there was no need to entrust them to a single messenger to travel the whole distance between sender and addressee. There is, in fact, evidence for established relay systems, which allowed mail to be conveyed more rapidly, in that they used a sequence of couriers one after the other, and not one single messenger who would necessarily have to rest from time to time.<sup>26</sup>

Officials were expected to reply to the king by return of post: they often stated the time at which they received the letter to which they were replying (Lafont 1997: 331–332), which in certain cases was offered as an excuse for delay. Thus Mukannišum added at the end of one of his letters:<sup>27</sup>

My lord should not say: 'Mukannišum has been negligent about these spears.'  
When my lord's tablet arrived, it was night: the bars of the palace had been set  
and I was not able to send out these spears.

In addition, mention is sometimes made of abnormal delays in the conveyance of mail.<sup>28</sup>

### The dangers of the journey

Like every important undertaking, the dispatch of messengers was preceded by the consultation of omens, more especially in time of war. Thus Asqudum declared:<sup>29</sup> 'I took the omens for the safety of the messengers: they were not good. I will take them again for them. When the omens are favourable, I shall send them.'

If the omens were bad and there was need for haste, one could send the messengers under escort, as is suggested by Išme-Dagan:<sup>30</sup>

When you have this letter brought to me, give strict orders for [its] protection during the journey. Take omens for the safety of the carriers of the letter, or have thirty of your servants escort them to the river and [then] return to you.

Despite these precautions, it happened that messengers were stopped by the enemy and the letters they carried intercepted: this accounts for those letters in the palace of Mari addressed 'to my lord' which were not intended for the Mari king.<sup>31</sup> Recourse was sometimes achieved with merchants, who would carry messages in secret through the lands of the enemy.

## THE READING OF LETTERS

There were different ways in which letters were read to the king, depending on the nature of the correspondence, domestic or diplomatic. Letters were also sometimes

forwarded to a third party who was not an intended addressee, or they might be copied in part or in whole. We will see later how a good many of the messages sent in antiquity remain unknown because for various reasons they were not sent in writing.

### The reading of royal correspondence

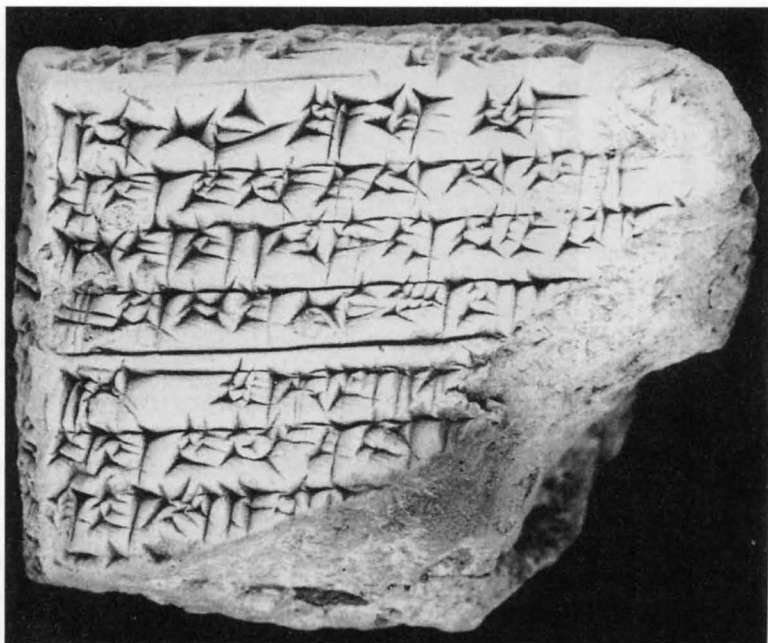
The way in which the king had letters read to him could vary with the sender, depending on whether this was an official or another king. In the case of administrative correspondence, letter-carriers would not normally be admitted to the royal presence but left their letters 'at the door of the palace'. It was only in case of urgency that they would have direct access to the sovereign. Hence the great importance of the royal secretary who read the correspondence to his master. Among such officials the best known is Šu-nuhra-Halu, secretary to Zimri-Lim (Sasson 1988). Correspondents would often attach to their letter to the king another addressed to Šu-nuhra-Halu, in which they copied or summarised the first. In this way the royal secretary would know in advance the content of the message he was to read and could draw the king's attention to specific points; the letter he received would often conclude with the announcement that a gift was on its way. A letter to Šu-nuhra-Halu from Ibal-Addu shows that messages sent to Zimri-Lim had first to be heard by his secretary, even when delivered orally and not in tablet form:<sup>32</sup> 'Behold, I have sent you a complete report by Ladin-Addu. Pay close attention to his report and bring him before the king.'

It is notable that certain correspondents implicitly accuse Šu-nuhra-Halu of having 'censored' parts of certain letters they had sent to the sovereign. The general Yasim-Dagan, for example, threatened to come and read his letter to the king in person.<sup>33</sup> Others would flatter the powerful royal secretary:<sup>34</sup> 'When I found myself at Mari, with my lord, and you were my friend and you fought by my side, I saw your power. Everything you said before my lord was agreed; nothing happened without your consent.'

In the case of letters between kings, the process was nearly always the same: the king gave his instructions (*têmam wu'urum*) to those whom we call 'messengers' (*mâr šipri*), but who were in fact diplomats (Lafont 1992). The latter, having arrived at the court of the addressee, repeated this *têmam*, whether by reading a tablet or reciting on oral message committed to memory. In most cases the foreign 'messengers' were brought before the king in the course of an audience, during which they would themselves read the tablet they had brought. Certain messengers insisted that their message be heard with due attention:<sup>35</sup>

[While Yan]šib-Addu delivered my lord's message, Hammu-rabi [. . .] all the while as he delivered the message [did not cease to lis]ten and opened not his mouth; he remained [very] attentive until he had finished his message. [When the message was finish]ed he addressed us in these terms.

In a number of cases, messages were read not in open audience but in secret. Thus Iddiyatum, Zimri-Lim's envoy to Asqur-Addu in Karana, informs him that messengers have come from Kurda but that he was unable to attend the meeting at which they gave their message.<sup>36</sup> One knows too of the complaints of Yamšum, who was no longer admitted to the secret council of Haya-sumu and so no longer heard the news



**Figure 28.5** Example of a copy of a letter within a letter. After the address (lines 1–2: ‘Say to my Lord, thus speaks Itûr-Asdû your servant’) the sender announced (1.3–4): ‘Here is a copy of the letter which I had made to be carried, may my Lord take note (literally ‘hear’). After a double line, we read (5–6): ‘Tell Turib-adal, thus speaks Itûr-Asdû, your brother (the rest is broken).’ (J.-M. Durand, *Mél. Garelli*: 25 and 29).

brought by foreign messengers.<sup>37</sup> Yamšum even explains that Haya-sumu refuses to have letters from Zimri-Lim read in his presence:<sup>38</sup>

My lord had a tablet brought to Haya-sumu. My lord wrote me this: ‘Let the tablet be opened before you, and listen to it.’ He (= Haya-sumu) has received the tablet, but I was not (able) to hear the contents of the tablet.

Many other such examples could be given.

When the king travelled, his secretary stored in a chest the tablets received, and deposited them in the palace archives on his return. This explains why many of the letters at Mari were, in fact, addressed to the king while he was away from the palace: this was the case for the letters from queens, from the palace steward Mukannišum, and so on. It could happen that one has both the letter to the king and the reply to it.<sup>39</sup>

### Letters forwarded or copied

Certain letters were read several times. So it was when Samsi-Addu forwarded to one of his sons a letter that had been addressed to himself, as in this example:<sup>40</sup> ‘Behold, I send you the tablet that Šuprerah sent me: listen to it.’

Certain functionaries saw fit to forward to the king, together with a covering letter, correspondence they had received themselves. This is an example from La'um:<sup>41</sup> 'Behold, I have put under seal the tablet of Yašub-El which he had brought to me, relating to the inhabitants, and which I have just had sent to my lord. May my lord take note of it (lit. "hear it").'

This was done more particularly when the governor of a province received a letter from a foreign king (Durand 1991: 28–29). He would take note of the letter and then send it on to the king, having placed it in an envelope under his own seal. A letter from Zakira-Hammu, governor of Qaṭṭunan, is a good example. Having reproduced the content of a letter he had received from Qarni-Lim, king of Andarig, he adds:<sup>42</sup> 'I have just sent the messenger of Qarni-Lim to my lord. Furthermore, I have sealed the tablet from Qarni-Lim that came to me, and I have had it taken to my lord.'

In a case like this, the tablet would have travelled from Andarig to Qaṭṭunan under the seal of its sender, Qarni-Lim; then from Qaṭṭunan to Mari, under the seal of its addressee, Zakira-Hammu, who forwarded the letter to a third person, in this case the king of Mari, together with a covering letter.

Sometimes the original was retained and its contents copied in whole or in part:<sup>43</sup> a substantial proportion of the correspondence that has not come down to us directly may thus be reconstituted, at least in part. The most extraordinary case I know of is represented by *FM* II 116. Turum-natki, king of Apum, sent a letter to Zimri-Lim. The latter wrote to Sumu-hadu, attaching to his own letter the letter from Turum-natki. Writing to the Benjaminites, Sumu-hadu quoted in his letter what Turum-natki had said. And finally, Sumu-hadu reported to Zimri-Lim on his mission in a letter in which he copied the letter he sent to the Benjaminites. The only letter we have is this last, but through it we know of three others.

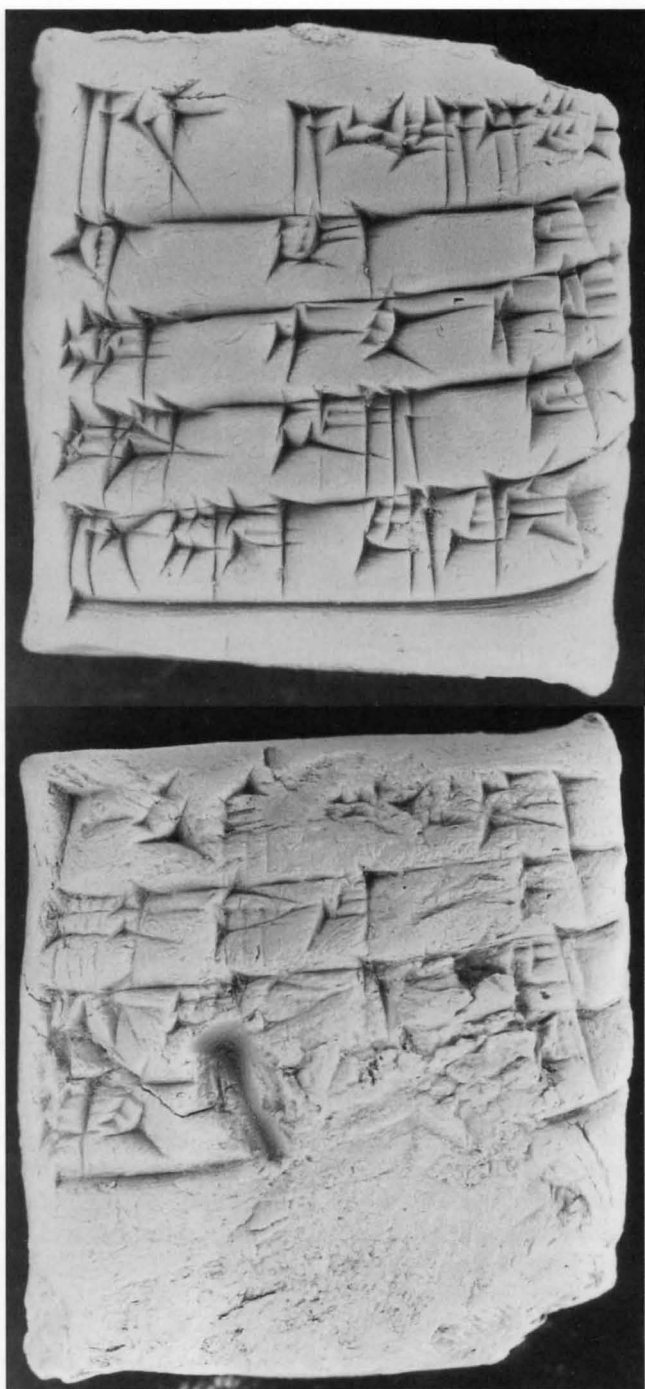
### Written letters and oral messages

In certain cases, to counter the risk of interception, messages were not set down in writing. Zimri-Lim's sister, the princess Atrakatum, revealed to her brother the existence of a plot at the court of her husband Sumu-dabi, the Benjaminite king of Samanum, which she hoped to recount in detail at a meeting with Zimri-Lim in person:<sup>44</sup>

Another thing: the Bedouin, the sheikh whom my lord once sent to Sumu-dabi and to whom he (the latter) had accorded a ration of textiles, one day, in the middle of the night, came here and told all sorts of things to Sumu-dabi. When I have a meeting with my lord, I will repeat to him all the man's words. If that should not happen and the affair is urgent, he should write to me what should be done; I will have written on a tablet the details of what this man said, and I will have it taken to my lord.

The notion that certain things cannot be set down in writing occurs repeatedly. Samsi-Addu thus writes to Yasmah-Addu:<sup>45</sup>

On the subject of what Samsi-Dagan told you, this is what you wrote to me: 'It is not appropriate to write such things on a tablet.' Why is this? Do it and send



**Figure 28.6** A short letter of accreditation. 'Say to my father Zimri-Lim, thus (speaks) Iškur-andullî, your son. That I have given instructions to Yašûb-Addu, in response to your message and that I have just sent him to my father' (unpublished A.2746).

it to me! If not [there must be] a trusted man who can bring an oral message (lit. who can take the words in his mouth). Give him your instructions and send him to me so that he may set out these things before me.

Messengers who brought a purely oral message had to offer proof of their status, as is shown by this letter of accreditation sent to Zimri-Lim by Haya-Sumu:<sup>46</sup>

Behold, I have given full instructions to Aqbu-Abum, my servant, and I have sent him to you. Give great attention to the instructions I have given him. Give him [your] instructions promptly and send him back to me. Apart from him there is no-one in my service suitable for a mission.

The danger of purely oral communication was on one occasion explicitly underlined by Samsi-Addu: was what he had been told by a messenger of the Gutis resident in Šikšabbum, with regard to the instructions he had purportedly received from their leader Induše, true or not? Samsi-Addu explains the different tests that allowed him to trust the message the envoy brought:<sup>47</sup>

He gave me as evidence a *bullum*-ring I had given to the messenger Mutušu. Furthermore, Etellini, a colleague of Mutušu's, was ill at Arrapha: he spoke of this man's illness. He gave me these two proofs and so I had trust in his words.

To send envoys without a written tablet could cause problems. Hence, the messengers sent to Babylon by Išme-Dagan were embarrassed by the presence at the audience of envoys from Zimri-Lim, against whom their master wished to make complaints. Hammu-rabi, sensing that they were withholding part of their report, tried in vain to make them speak. He therefore had brought to him the Babylonian who had accompanied Išme-Dagan's messengers from Ekallatum:<sup>48</sup> 'After he had repeated the report which Išme-Dagan's messengers had given, he completed it in these terms.'

One sees that all had had to learn by heart the message that Išme-Dagan intended for Hammu-rabi, as the Babylonian has to begin by repeating the same thing as the messengers from Ekallatum.

A very interesting case, in which the oral message was deliberately misleading while the truth was put in writing, is provided by a letter from the nomad chief Ibal-El:<sup>49</sup>

When my lord sends me a messenger, let my lord send orally this message: 'Let your people be gathered together. Assuredly, I shall be going to Der' (or wherever my lord wishes). Let him send me this message orally, but on the tablet inform me of the true route that my lord will follow.

The passage makes no sense unless, on the arrival of a messenger, Ibal-El had to listen, in the presence of a number of people, to the message delivered orally; the ruse he proposes to the king suggests furthermore that he would afterwards read or have read to him the true content of the tablet that had been brought to him. It appears, then, that the messenger, in this case, would have completed in person the whole journey from the king to Ibal-El, having received special instructions on his departure.

It might happen that a royal order was communicated only orally. The official to whom it was addressed would not fail to note the fact, in case of future problems, as here Ašak-magir:<sup>50</sup> 'Iši-Ahu, the courier, Zibnatum's man, came to me, bringing no tablet from my lord. He said: "By my lord's command, place seals on the house of Bannum and Zakura-Abum."'

Often, too, written confirmation might be asked for news that had been heard only by rumour. Hence this letter from a governor of Qaṭṭunan:<sup>51</sup> 'I have heard only by public rumour of my lord's visit to Qaṭṭunan. If my lord is coming, a tablet should be sent to me quickly so that I can be ready for his arrival.'

Sometimes an official explicitly expressed his desire for a written order from the king before complying. So it was that queen Šibtu wrote to Zimri-Lim:<sup>52</sup>

Mukannišum came and said to me: 'This gold, it was to me that it was assigned.' I replied: 'So long as no tablet has come from my lord, I shall not hand over the gold.' Was the gold assigned to Mukannišum? Let a tablet be sent by my lord if I ought to hand over (this) gold.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen the degree of sophistication attained by the correspondence of the Amorite Near East and the importance attached to written communication in this period. It must be emphasised, however, that it was not only the most powerful kings who sent their messages in written form: nomad chiefs did the same, affording us for once an opportunity to know something of them other than through the distorting lens of the writings of sedentary populations. Women, too, had recourse to writing. The evidence that survives, of course, relates primarily to queens and princesses, but these left behind them a considerable body of letters. And finally, it is because certain prophets were unable to pass on their god's messages directly to the king that several dozen of their prophecies are known to us from their letters (Charpin 2002). It is easy for us to understand a woman of the time of Samsi-Addu when she writes that, thanks to the post, distance is in a way abolished:<sup>53</sup> 'At present, I fear that Akatiya will say: "Mari is far." It is not far at all: the city of Mari is, in relation to Aššur, like the suburbs of Aššur. And the City is near for the post.'

And to conclude, one cannot do better than cite from a letter of Šadum-Labua, king of Ašnakkum, who writes *cum grano salis*:<sup>54</sup> 'My servants are tired from going to the nomad chief (*merhûm*) and I have exhausted the clay of Ašnakkum for the letters that I endlessly send out.'

## NOTES

\* This chapter summarises my forthcoming book entitled *Lire et écrire en Babylonie ancienne. Écriture, acheminement et lecture des lettres d'après les archives de Mari*, in which the unedited texts quoted here will be published.

1 For a summary of the period's political history, see Charpin and Ziegler 2003, with a list of sources pp. 1–27; bibliography in Charpin 2004a: 453–475.

2 For the correspondence between private individuals, see especially Sallaberger 1999.

3 See Streck 2000.



- 4 ARM XXVI/2 414: 30–33: 'Send me a discrete scribe, that I make (him) write the message which Šamaš has sent through my intermediary for the king.' We do have this message: see ARM XXVI/1 194.
- 5 Which may entail a greater literary quality, highlighted by Finet 1986.
- 6 One could cite the extreme case of some petitions where the style is particularly refined. At Mari, there is the example of a bilingual letter (Sumerian and Akkadian), sent by a scribe who wished to curry favour with Zimri-Lim soon after the latter's accession to the throne (*LAP0* 16 22). One could also consider the letter *OBTR* 150 (see Foster 1993).
- 7 ARM IV 86 (= *LAP0* 17 772).
- 8 ARM I 18 (= *LAP0* 16 43).
- 9 Unpublished A.3611+ (to appear in ARM XXIX).
- 10 ARM XXVI/2 394: 3–8.
- 11 See Charpin 2004b.
- 12 This is particularly the case in some of the correspondence of Yamšum, captain of the Mari garrison at Ilan-šura, see Charpin 1989.
- 13 ARM XXVI/1 276: 6–10.
- 14 A.1101 (= *LAP0* 16 230); see Sasson 1988, esp. p. 462.
- 15 *Ana X qibi-ma umma Y*.
- 16 ARM XXVI/2 384: 18'–19'.
- 17 ARM XXVI/1 127: 18.
- 18 Unpublished: A.861: 7–13 and 1'–8'.
- 19 See A.427, published in Charpin 1995a; see the detailed commentary in Sasson 2002.
- 20 I am not talking here about the letters sent by the king to a palace official or a family member during a journey.
- 21 As is the case, for example, of the 'plaidoyer *pro domo*' of Yasmah-Addu (see J.-M. Durand, *MARI* 5, p. 175) or ARM I 109, after J.-M. Durand, *LAP0* 16 70.
- 22 One might recall the existence of a particular seal in the 'foreign office' of Mari that was used exclusively to seal letters sent by Zimri-Lim, different from the one used to seal administrative documents: see Charpin 1992, esp. pp. 70–71, § 3.2.3.
- 23 *OBTR*, p. 250 no. 5.
- 24 ARM XXVI/2 490: 4–7.
- 25 M.8762, published in Charpin 2001: 21.
- 26 See ARM XXVI/1 29: 4–9.
- 27 ARM XIII 8 (= *LAP0* 16 104).
- 28 The nicest example comes in the letter ARM III 59 [= *LAP0* 16 329] (see the commentary by Lafont 1997: 326).
- 29 ARM XXVI/1 87.
- 30 *FM* III 14: 18–25.
- 31 See especially ARM XXVI/1 168–172.
- 32 ARM XXVIII 75: 4–9.
- 33 A.4215 (= *LAP0* 16 65).
- 34 ARM XXVIII 109: 5–8.
- 35 ARM XXVI/2 449: 7–12.
- 36 ARM XXVI/2 521: 42–44.
- 37 ARM XXVI/2 307, 308 and 309.
- 38 ARM XXVI/2 315: 4–7.
- 39 For example: ARM X 16 and X 136 (= *LAP0* 18 1158 and 1157); X 131 (= *LAP0* 18 1154) and XXVI/1 242. See also the case of A.1285 and ARM XIII 10 (= *LAP0* 16 136 and 134).
- 40 ARM I 16 (= *LAP0* 16 301): 5–8.
- 41 ARM V 78 (= *LAP0* 17 631): 5–11.
- 42 See ARM II 79 = XXVII 69: 29–33.
- 43 See, for example, ARM I 24+ (= *LAP0* 16 no. 330): 3–8 or ARM XXVI/1 25.
- 44 ARM X 91 (= *LAP0* 18 1186): 3'–15'.
- 45 ARM I 76 (= *LAP0* 16 58): 20–29.
- 46 ARM XXVIII 85: 5–12 and 15–20.

- 47 ShA 1 11: 25–34.
- 48 ARM XXVI/2 384: 52'–53'.
- 49 Unpublished A.836.
- 50 FM II 49: 5–10.
- 51 FM II 47: 4–11.
- 52 ARM X 18 (= LAPO 18 1132): 5'–14'.
- 53 A.1248: 29–34 (unpublished, quoted by J.-M. Durand, MARI 4, p. 410, n. 155).
- 54 ARM XXVIII 105: 9–10.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- ARM = Archives royales de Mari
- FM II = Charpin et Durand 1994
- FM III = Charpin et Durand 1997
- LAPO 16, 17 and 18 = Durand 1997, 1998 and 2000
- MARI = MARI, *Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires*
- OBTR = Dalley, Walker and Hawkins 1976
- ShA 1 = Eidem and Laessoe 2001

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